

Ida Tarbell



Ida M. Tarbell at age 70 from her autobiography All In The Days Work. Courtesy of Drake Well Museum

Ida Minerva Tarbell, born in 1857, was a woman far ahead of her time. She lived during a period of our history when few opportunities were open to women other than teaching, nursing, and homemaking. While a few women did write poetry, essays, or novels, Ida Tarbell, with her inquisitive spirit and thorough nature, pioneered historical research and set standards which professionals today strive to emulate. She was born two years before the birth of the oil industry and eight years before the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. Both events were to influence her life and career. Of her twenty-three major books the best known are *The History of the Standard Oil Company* and nine about Abraham Lincoln.

Ida Minerva Tarbell, the first child of Franklin Sumner and Elizabeth McCullough Tarbell, was born November 5, 1857 in the log home of her maternal grandfather, Walter Raleigh McCullough. His farm was located in Hatch Hollow, near Wattsburg in northwest Pennsylvania. Both of her parents were teachers by profession, though her father was a carpenter and joiner by trade. The Tarbells, however, wanted land on which to make a permanent home, and believed that the West offered more than Pennsylvania. In the late spring of 1857, Franklin Tarbell left Erie County for the

farmlands of Iowa. His wife and their household goods were to follow in August—the money for the trip was in the bank. The Panic of 1857, however, closed all the small banks in Pennsylvania, and forced Elizabeth to remain with her family in Hatch Hollow. During the long depression that followed Tarbell was forced to forfeit the farm in Iowa, and returned to Pennsylvania in 1859. On August 27 of that year the Drake Well was drilled near Titusville, an event that was going to change the course of history (and the course of the Tarbells' future).

In 1860, when Ida was three years old, Franklin Tarbell, like so many others, rushed to the oil region. He moved his family to a shanty along Cherry Run in Rouseville, where he began building wooden oil storage tanks. Ida spent her days playing among oil derricks on slippery, oil-soaked soil.

As the oil industry developed and the tank business prospered, the Tarbells moved into a new home on the hill above Rouseville. In an article entitled "Pioneer Women of the Oil Industry," written by Ida Tarbell in 1934, she tells of her life in Rouseville—attending Mrs. Rice's home school—and the problems her mother had bringing children up among the oil derricks. This article emphasized that women were the "civilizers of the oil towns." Women worked to get a church for the community; they served as nurses; and they fought to keep gambling houses, saloons, and other places of ill repute out of Rouseville. While still living in Rouseville, Ida's father extended his business to Pithole during its boom

of 1865. With the decline of Pithole, however, the Tarbells moved to Titusville.

Titusville, the Tarbells thought, was a better place in which to bring up children. It was not a so-called boom town—the community had been established before the Drake Well. The church and school were there—both institutions for a good living. In 1870, when Ida was thirteen years old, her father bought the Bonta House, a hotel in Pithole, for six hundred dollars (it had cost sixty thousand dollars to build). He took the lumber to Titusville where he built a house which was to be their permanent home. It still stands at 324 East Main Street.

Ida Tarbell entered high school in Titusville, graduating with highest honors in 1875. Surprisingly, it was not the study of history, economics, and government which aroused her curiosity and set her thinking; it was science. Her greatest intellectual passion at that time was for a microscope.

In 1875 there were very few choices for women, and combining marriage and employment was not one of them—women generally had either a husband or a career. Ida Tarbell wanted a career, so she decided she would never marry.

The suffrage movement and the demand for women's rights were issues stirring the voices of many. She considered two of these rights particularly relevant—the right to an education and the right to earn a living, and pursued both with complete devotion. The older she grew, the more determined she was to be independent. She saw only one way to achieve this—she would become a teacher, a biologist.

Ida Tarbell entered Allegheny College in nearby Meadville in the fall of 1876, one of the few

*Edwin Drake's successful drilling for oil changed the region, and the life of Ida Tarbell.
Courtesy of Drake Well Museum*





Ida Tarbell (left) with her mother Esther McCullough Tarbell and her sister Sarah A. Tarbell on the front porch of Ida's home in Connecticut. (c. 1916) Courtesy of Drake Well Museum

women in the school and the “lone girl in the freshman class of 40 hostile and indifferent boys.” Upon graduation in 1880, she accepted the position of Preceptress of Poland Union Seminary, Poland, Ohio, at a salary of five hundred dollars a year. She saw this position as a step toward economic independence and toward becoming a biologist. Despite good reports about her teaching, she felt she had failed, and resigned at the end of two years. She returned to Titusville and resumed her study of science, but not for long.

It was a custom in the Tarbell household to entertain the Methodist ministers who periodically filled the pulpit in the Titusville church. On one Sunday, their guest was Dr. Theodore L. Flood who had retired from active ministry to become editor

of a magazine published in Meadville called *The Chautauquan*. He asked Ida Tarbell to help him for a month or two, and she immediately accepted. What began as a temporary position lasted six years, and proved to be an important turning point in her life. Her quest for truth and accuracy was fulfilled, not through her microscope, but through her pen.

Ida Tarbell felt a need to find out more about women and their contributions to public life. The women of the French Revolution particularly interested and excited her. She wrote about some of these women in articles which were then published in *The Chautauquan*., but she was ashamed of these sketches, written from so little research and knowledge. She felt this particularly about her writing on Madame Roland, leader of an influential



Political cartoons such as this appeared in newspapers after Ida Tarbell's "History of The Standard Oil Company" articles began in McClure's Magazine in November 1902. Courtesy of Drake Well Museum

salon during the French Revolution, and made up her mind she was going to learn more about her. That meant research—it meant Paris.

Ida Tarbell was thirty-three years old. According to the social code of the time, she was too old, especially for a woman, to try something new. Yet, with one hundred and fifty dollars she had saved from her one hundred dollar-a-month salary she received on *The Chau-tauquan*, she gave up her position and went to Paris in 1890 to work on a book-length biography of Madame Roland. She supported herself in France by writing articles on various phases of Parisian life for magazines and newspapers in the United States, including *Scribner's Magazine* and for publishers like Samuel Sidney McClure.

After four years in France, she returned to Titusville to relax, but shortly after her arrival she received a call from Samuel McClure, asking her to write a short life of Napoleon Bonaparte for his newly-launched magazine.

Before the Napoleon story was finished, McClure suggested that Ida Tarbell become an editor of the magazine, and she accepted. She joined the *McClure's Magazine* staff where she remained for the next twelve years. This association led to her long career as magazine writer, editor, biographer, and historian.

Her first assignment for McClure was to prepare a similar biography of Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln had been dead only thirty years, and there were many people whom she could interview who had known him. Robert Lincoln, the president's only surviving son, gave her a daguerreotype of his father that had never been published, and proved the inspiration she needed in her tireless research and fact-checking. The years she spent on *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* did more than provide her with a continuing interest. It made her realize how important and precious her country, the United States, was and that its problems were her problems.

The rise of monopolies coupled with her experience as a girl in the oil region led to another assignment—a history of the Standard Oil Company. Ida Tarbell's personal interest in the story grew as she began to share with John Phillips (partner of McClure) details of the effect of the Standard Oil Company Trust on her family and hometown. It was Phillips who convinced her to write up an outline and show it to McClure when she went to visit him while on one of his many European vacations. McClure accepted her proposition.

After years of research, Ida Tarbell produced a detailed analysis of the most perfect of all monopolies, Standard Oil. Appearing in nineteen installments in *McClure's Magazine*, beginning in November of 1902, it was subsequently published as a two-volume book in 1904. She had hoped it would be received as a historical study; instead, to her dismay, she was labeled a "muckraker" by President Theodore Roosevelt.

What was a muckraker? President Roosevelt brought the term into popularity when he used the allusion in his speech on April 14, 1906, to refer to those making sweeping and unfair charges of corruption against public offi-

cials. Roosevelt's allusion is from John Bunyan's allegory published in 1678, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, in which the character is so absorbed in raking up muck, he is unable to see the celestial crown held above him.

President Roosevelt, while engaged in a "trust-busting" campaign, called a number of authors including Ida Tarbell, Frank Norris, and Upton Sinclair muckrakers. Yet many feel that Ida Tarbell differed from the other so-called "muckrakers" and social reformers because her point of view was primarily that of a historian—a journalist after documented facts, not the advocate of a cause or a reformer. According to some, *The History of the Standard Oil Company* is, to this day, the best documented history of its kind ever written. Influenced by Ida Tarbell's work, anti-trust laws of the states and the federal government, decisions of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, and investigations by Congress, the Supreme Court of the United States handed down a decision on May 1911 that the Standard Oil Trust be dissolved in the next six months. As a result the corporation was divided into more than thirty companies, paving the way for competition to return once more to the oil business.

In 1906 Ida Tarbell became co-editor of *The American Magazine*, with whom she remained associated for nine years. At an age when most people retired, Ida Tarbell took up a new career as a lecturer. She invested proceeds from her tours in her forty-acre farm at Redding Ridge, Connecticut, her home for the rest of her life. In addition to her lecture tours, she kept up with her freelance writing, and prepared her autobiography *All in a Day's Work*. During World War I she was appointed to

the Women's Committee of the Council of National Defense by President Woodrow Wilson. She served as president of The Pen and Brush, a group of women authors and artists for thirty years. In 1916 she was sent to Paris to observe the Armistice and Versailles Conference. Through her last years she showed few signs of slowing down, traveling, doing interviews, and writing. In 1939 Titusville gave her a Recognition Dinner in the high school gymnasium, and she recalled her Pennsylvania roots. "It was lucky for me that my family came to Titusville. I received the best instruction in life in this city and the good things given to me in those early years have remained with me."

Ida Tarbell, daughter of the oil region—pioneer journalist and historian—died of pneumonia on January 6, 1944, at the Bridgeport Hospital in Connecticut. She was buried in the family plot in Woodlawn Cemetery in Titusville. Ida Tarbell's passion for truth and knowledge is the enduring legacy of this remarkable Pennsylvanian.

text by Mabel K. Clark

Mabel K. Clark is a native of Titusville. She received her B.S. in Education, and her M.Ed. from Penn State University. She received fellowships in American studies at Eastern Baptist, and economics at Union College. She taught American History at Titusville High School and for six years prior to her retirement was social studies coordinator for the Titusville Area Schools. At the high school she organized the Drake History Club, affiliated with the state Junior Historians, and in 1971 was named Adviser of the Year by the Pennsylvania Federation of Junior Historians. Her book, Titusville, An Illustrated History is used in the local schools. Although she is a world traveler, Mabel Clark has retained a strong interest in local history, and serves as Historian of Tidioute Chapter, D.A.R., and the First Presbyterian Church. For many years she has researched and lectured about Ida Tarbell.



Ida M. Tarbell (left) with her sister Sarah and brother William (1865). Courtesy of Pelletier Library, Allegheny College

FOR FURTHER READING

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Drake Well Museum and The Reis Library of Allegheny College have large collections of Ida Tarbell's books and papers.



Ida M. Tarbell at work. Courtesy of Ida M. Tarbell Collection, Pelletier Library, Allegheny College, Meadville, Pennsylvania.

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